

Life in a Zangskari Nunnery

By Konchok Choskit (Lauren Galvin)

Lauren Galvin is an American student studying in Khachodling Nunnery in Zangskar. She was inspired by American nun Karma Lekshe Tsomo to travel to India to live among the Zangskari nuns. She is serving as Zangskar Field Manager for Gaden Relief Projects.



Author Lauren Galvin with Ani Skalzang Lhamo

For the past 27 months I have been living with nuns of Khachodling. This means — “Blissful Land of the Dakini” — It was named by Gegen Khyentse Rinpoche, for the work of Khandro Thrinlay Chodon in this lifetime. This nunnery is one of Khandro-la’s main projects. It is a simple organic nunnery located in Sani, Zangskar. I have spent 17 full months there including one long winter and three summers.

Khachodling is located above the village of Sani approximately 10 km from Zangskar’s main town of Padum. There have been around 21 nuns(Khandro-la says her 21 nuns represent 21 Taras) and their ages range from 10 to 44 years of age. The nunnery has existed for 13 years. Two Zanskari nuns, Ani Tsering Drolma and Ani Sonam Lhadrol were students of Gegen Khyentse Rinpoche in Manali and he had instructed them to return to their homeland and practice diligently. At that time the young Apho Rinpoche’s daughter, Thrinlay Chodon, encouraged them and promised to support their practice.

On their return to Zanskar they built two small huts on the hillside in accord with their teachers instructions which was to be away from the village, so that they could better study, practice, and devote their lives to realizing the teachings of their masters in female form.[\[1\]](#)

Khachodling nunnery is on the same site that was once the home of the great mediation master Drupchen Ngawang Tsering. It has also been the home of other great yogis, and therefore well known as a very blessed and auspicious space.

Slowly more young women opted for the monastic life and joined the nunnery, building their own huts alongside Ani Sonam and Ani Tsering. Most of the nuns are from the village of Sani with the exception of one nun from Salapi, one nun from Stara, one nun from Pipcha and one nun from Shila, all of which are located around the Padum area.

Having spent a significant amount of time with the nuns, I have learned about their ways of life—summer and winter—their ritual calendar, daily chores and ways in which they support

themselves. I have worked alongside them, living as a member of their community rather than as a Western visitor passing through. They have included me as part of their nunnery and so have provided me with an honest insight into their public and private lives; that is, their relationship with their community, their relationships amongst themselves, their meditation practices, and their personal thoughts on themselves as female monastics.

When the nunnery first began, the founding nuns had very little support, except that from their families and villages and a small donation from Kim Gutschow. They had of course the full spiritual support of their master Gegen Khyentse Rinpoche. After the passing of Gegen Khyentse, Khandro Thrinlay Chodon has taken the role of their spiritual guide. She is the daughter of the late Apho Rinpoche (Gegen Khyentse's Master) and the great granddaughter of the renowned meditation master, Togden Shakya Shri. These great Masters are known in the Himalayan area as enlightened meditation masters of the Drukpa Kagyu lineage.

Khandro Rinpoche has been visiting the nunnery regularly in the recent years and has significantly supported the education and training of the nuns as well as the construction of their facilities. In 2007, a prayer hall was completed, as was a rough road, a new common kitchen and a green house. Till this time the nuns have lived without meeting area to perform their rituals and prayers. Khachodling is the only Drukpa nunnery in all of Zangskar.

Khachodling nunnery has also regularly received financial and skills support from Karma Lekshe Tsomo's Jamyang Foundation, Kim Gutschow and more recently Gaden Relief. This is a great support to these nuns. This open support from other Buddhist traditions is invaluable to helping preserve the local ancient culture and spirituality in this remote area.

Even with the help of these sponsors the nuns still struggle in their daily activities with very meager facilities. Up till a year ago they had no knives, few kitchen supplies, no musical instruments for pujas and as said before not even a place to meet and study. Much of their time in summer is spent preparing for winter and in recent years they have been assisting in building and gardening.

Summer is a very busy time for the nuns, as the season is short and is the only time during which they can work on outdoor projects and prepare for the long winter ahead. Preparing for winter means collecting enough cow dung for the nuns to keep their individual rooms heated all winter when they conduct long retreat sessions. Collecting cow dung is no easy task as I can attest to, climbing up the mountain -side with a large woven basket on one's back. The paths are measly animal tracks so one must maneuver with balance, skill and care, scanning the mountain side until one's basket is packed above the rim with the dung held in place by a large rope or scarf to allow for about double of what the basket should probably be holding. These excursions are usually conducted early morning and late afternoon on the days when the nuns are not performing their large communal pujas, which usually occur on the 8th, 10th, 15th, 25th, and 30th of each Tibetan month.

On ritual days the nuns rise early, and prepare the proper ritual instruments such as tormas (sacrificial offerings) and tsok (communal offerings) made of barley flour (tsampa), cane sugar (kuram), butter (mar), and sometimes barley beer (chang) and buttermilk (dara). The rituals

alternate between various tsog offerings to Guru Rinpoche, Arya Tara, Amitabha, Machig Labdron, and Chenrezig. On other occasions, the nuns read from their book of prayers to bring peace and benefit to all sentient beings.

The nuns study English and yoga for two hours per day, Hindi an hour per day, and receive classical Tibetan practice on every Sunday. Every other day the nuns gather together for an hour or two and make carpets and knit beautifully embroidered socks and hats which they hope in the future to offer visitors and villagers a like. This may be in the future an important source of self-sufficiency.

The greenhouse garden complements the nunnery's supply of dried veggies in the winter and fresh veggies during the warmer months. Summer is the time for drying vegetables e.g. greens, cabbage, cauliflower, and tomatoes - brought in (insofar as the roads remain open) from Kargil or grown locally.

Fall which begins early September when the entire village reads the 'Bum (Prajnaparamita sutra), Kangyur and on occasion, the Tangyur texts. The nuns are often called down to assist in reading these texts alongside monks and male villagers as the majority of female villagers remain illiterate and are therefore most often restricted to house and field work. Fortunately the Khachodling nuns rarely have to assist in their households except on occasion when their families are in harvesting season and may call them to cook.

Winter brings a huge shift in the nuns' outer and inner lives. It is a time for serious practice and retreat. Gegen Rigdzin Wangdus has been teaching and guiding the nuns in their practices. Khandro Rinpoche appointed Gegen to be their ritual and meditation Master. Gegen is an impeccable student of Apho Rinpoche, Stagna Rinpoche and Shabdrung Rinpoche. Recently Khandro Rinpoche also appointed another accomplished yogi student of her father Lama Rigdzin to train the nuns for the traditional three years retreat. This is extremely important because until now the nuns potentials are underestimated and Khandro-la has vowed to give every opportunity to the nuns to pursue their spiritual aspirations. Last year she also bought the best quality dharma instruments for the nuns from Darjeeling and many monks were wondering why she was wasting so much money on female. Recently, when everyone saw how beautifully the nuns are blowing the long trumpets and drums, it has silenced all remarks. In this way Khandro-la's position to protect the nuns have kept their spirits alive.

Beginning mid-December, the nuns will hold a ritual when they prepare the space and their minds for the coming months of retreat - they are forbidden from leaving their rooms and from seeing and speaking to outsiders. Some nuns are able to stay in retreat for up to four months. Usually the nuns complete half of their ngondro (preliminary practice) per winter, with the two monastic roommates alternating between two- month sessions. The nun in retreat requires a helper to continuously stay and bring water and other staples such as milk, sugar and grains to the nunnery. The assistant must also shovel snow off the roof and doorsteps, which, like collecting cow dung, is no easy task when the snow falls for four days continually. Piles several plus feet high and has to be shoveled by a flat wooden shovel purchased in Kargil!

After the snow fall stops and the sun comes out, the nuns have to be sure the snow has been completely shoveled off their roofs to ensure there is no leakage in their small mud-brick huts.

The nun in retreat awakes at 4 A.M every morning to begin her first session and doesn't finish her third session until 6 or 7 at night.

After their daily meditation sessions are complete, they perform a completion ritual to prepare themselves for the outside world again, to conclude their session and purify any transgressions made during their practice.

After all the nuns have finished their individual meditation retreats, they hold a month long prayer session in their communal kitchen reading from their Kagyu prayer text which includes prayers to bring peace and happiness to the planet and all beings. This is also a busy time when the nuns cook for each other on a rotational basis and must gather the proper staples, often trudging all day through feet of snow to Padum and back with their supplies on their backs. Having been witness to this event, watching and listening to the nuns and their teacher together in melodious rhythm and concentrated focus I found it awakens the bodhicitta mind and inspires one toward deeper practice.

Spring time in Zangskar is as wonderful as every other season. It is joyful at the thought of warm weather ahead and another opportunity for reading texts in the village. Their monthly ritual calendar continues and they clean their rooms and begin larger projects to be carried on through the summer season.

Of course, all year long, morning and evening, the nuns read through their ngondro practice, khurim (prayers for others) and prayer texts.

As Khachodling is still a new nunnery, there is much to be done and Khandro-la with the nuns have plans for a three-year retreat center, (housing 7 nuns at a time, while 7 nuns continue to maintain the carpet and creative activities of the gonpa and 7 nuns in an intensive study program). Of course, this is all in the future and will take time to organize.

Management of the nunnery, including the preparation the proper receipts for incoming and outgoing funds means the nuns must be very focused and literate in English. Fortunately a few nuns are already capable of this as they have previously studied for years in the Zangskar public school system.^[2]

The nuns also hope to conduct some outreach programmes for the local area. For example in solar training, composting and medical care. In this way the nuns of Sani can give back to their community and teach their fellow women what they have had the opportunity of learning.

It should be mentioned, that for the nuns, meditation and prayer are essential aspects of their daily lives; the purpose for becoming nuns is to dedicate their lives to the Buddhist teachings and to realize the nature mind; in fact, to achieve enlightenment in female form and in this life time. This is a matter which I have discussed on many occasions with the nuns and they have confessed to me they do not wish to be reborn as men despite what village men, women and monks may think or say about this matter. And realizing their minds means knowing their minds, realizing the emptiness of self and all phenomena; however, they must first perform the proper purification and merit-making practices to prepare themselves for higher meditations. Nearly all

the nuns have said to me they believe men and women have equal opportunity for enlightenment. Now, whether they truly believe this or not, this is a different matter. And again, the reasons for becoming a nun in Zangskar are not so simple. Kim Gutschow in her book *Being a Buddhist Nun* makes clear that despite what the Buddhist texts may say about the equal opportunity for both men and women to attain enlightenment, social and economic practices often belie the textual sources. And Zangskar is certainly no exception. To what extent these nuns are reproducing simply another dialogue by stating they think they have just as good an opportunity as monks, and to what extent they truly believe what they say is a matter only each individual nun can know herself. But from what I have seen and heard, these nuns are certainly not disempowered and fooled by what appear to me to be at least historically sexist practices. For them, society can do what it chooses; what is most essential is focusing on their own minds and spiritual development. Again, to what extent the nuns view themselves as inferior to monks because they are women is a complicated issue, but I am arguing here that on the whole, at least at Khachodling nunnery, the nuns do not view themselves as inferior because they are women; rather, they at least partially realize their unique position as women, as nuns, as Drukpa Kagyu practitioners, with competent teachers, to achieve high realization in this lifetime. Now it is up to them to take advantage of their situation and practice the teachings their teachers have worked very hard to receive and master.

For the nuns of Khachodling, everything else besides meditation and prayer, though important, is merely secondary. For them, to benefit others best requires realization of their deepest selves, to embody the idea of bodhichitta, and this they do in their meditations and on the mundane level, where everything they do is to ultimately benefit others, not themselves. I have never seen the nuns hold back and not give someone the best they have, an important lesson for many Westerners and Easterners alike who try to accumulate more and more material things until they are near suffocation. The nuns hope to receive teachings on the Six Yogas of Naropa although a daunting task as these teachings are not easily accessible to women.

It will be, in fact, a great feat when these nuns complete their three -years retreat and continue to uphold the Drukpa Kagyu lineage and to pass onto the future young women who are looking to follow in their elders footsteps of a lifelong dedication to enlightenment. I have no doubt in these nuns' determination — their wisdom and inner strength — and that is why I cannot leave the nunnery: my inspiration is here with the Zangskari nuns.

Footnotes

1. Of course, the reason for becoming a nun in Zangskar is complicated. There is the pressure of arranged marriages placed on the young women by their families and the intense labor associated with household life. However, I believe this is not enough reason to keep a nun at a nunnery, as the celibate, monastic life is a difficult path nuns where the nuns must have had already experienced an understanding of the teachings (or else she will usually leave the nunnery after some time). Fortunately in Zangskar, or at least at Khachodling, the nuns often come from families of great yogis or practitioners, or from families where members of their households can read and at least partially understand the Buddhist texts. Plus, for young boys, the monastic path is considered the highest occupation, and so devoting ones life to the Dharma (though for monks it's often a more practical life choice for one's entire family) is not, as in the West, a strange undertaking. And, for young women in Zangskar, becoming a nun is at least now a days not just a space for foster children and youngest daughters; it is often a very personal and well considered decision. For the nuns of Khachodling, almost all of them have, themselves, made the personal choice to become a nun, and in many cases had to actually convince their families to let them come to the nunnery; many came to the nunnery at their families' chagrin.

2. From what I have observed, the public system is not great, and there have been far too many stories of teachers who take their pay but do not attend classes as they should. Additionally, school in the past was secondary to household work. Plus, winter time the schools close down and teachers leave for their homes, not returning for months. But, as Zangskar is developing at a fast rate, standards have improved and now families are viewing education as an essential part of a child's life if he or she is to have greater opportunity in the future to receive a decently paid job outside of the home. And it seems now more young girls are getting the opportunity to study where as in the past a good education was usually only offered to first or second born sons. However, there may still be a majority of boys in school as girls are kept tied to the home, or at least a better opportunity for boys to study than girls. However, presently these statistics I am unable to report with precision and accuracy.